

Martial Arts Teacher Becomes Pioneer of Tzu Chi in Jordan

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation

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In 1974, a Taiwanese man of 24 arrived in Jordan to teach martial arts to the country's royal family; he could speak neither English nor Arabic. More than three decades later, Chen Qiuhua has made the country his home and become a close friend of the royal family. He is the pioneer of Tzu Chi in Jordan. With the heart of respecting life, he decided in 2003 to become vegetarian in a country whose diet is based on meat and which grows few vegetables.

Chen's first job in Jordan was physical trainer in the Royal Palace to Prince Hassan, brother of the then King and uncle of the current one. "We called him a gentle giant," said Prince Hassan. "When you hear of someone having a high grade in martial arts, you assume that they are very strong. I often say that the longest distance in the world is that between the head and the heart. Some people like Chen Qiuhua have wisdom in their head and compassion in their heart."



The prince liked his trainer so much that he built a white house for him in the grounds of the royal palace; it was Chen's home for 17 years. As well as being the prince's personal trainer, he also helped to teach his four children how to ride horses at the royal stables. "He really taught them what is modesty, generosity and loyalty," said Princess Sarvath, the prince's wife. "The friendship he has shown us and the children is something I find hard to put into words. It is the most important thing in the world to us. When my daughter was three months old, Chen carried her in his arms like a little bird; they wandered around the garden and he would show her the leaves, the plants and everything around them. She said he was her first friends." The children he helped to teach have grown up; Chen has aged gracefully and his hair is growing grey. He has thought of retiring to Taiwan, but the royal family would be sad to see him go. "We would miss him very much," said Princess Sarvath. "Jordan is his second home. Even if he were to go home one day, I think he would keep coming back to us. I cannot imagine that he would just go for ever."



In Jordan for 36 years, Chen has friends at all levels of society, from high-ranking officials to ordinary people in the street. Fluent in Arabic, he acts as a bridge between rich and poor. His modest manner and smiling face has helped the people of Jordan get to know Taiwan. Polite but determined, Chen has a way of signing people up to joining Tzu Chi. One of them is a wholesaler named Jamire, who has known for many years. Wherever the foundation holds an aid distribution, near or far, Jamire will participate. "He is in charge of delivering goods to the south of the country hundreds of kilometers south (of Amman, the capital). We once asked him about paying for the gasoline but he refused."

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A typical distribution is to a tribe of Bedouins who live in a desert region 300 km south of Amman. Chen has been working with them for nine years. On the eve of the Ramadan festival, he and other volunteers helped to distribute food and other goods to 40 Bedouin families; they are nomadic herdsman who live in remote areas, often in poor conditions. Only recently did the government supply them with running water and electricity. The volunteers must drive 300 km from Amman to Thaghran, a settlement of a few simple tents surrounded by a blanket of sand. The tents are made of woven wool, warm in winter and cool in summer. Each tent belongs to a large family, with men and women living separately. The richer families raise livestock. Water is a scarce commodity. "Every eight days each household receives a container of water," said Chen. "If there are more people, that is your problem. You still have to use the same amount." The Bedouin have lived for many generations in this remote place; when others ask them why they stay, they reply that the land and the boundless sky is the home given to them by God. Where others would be miserable, they feel at home. For nine years, Chen has been like an old friend to these tribesmen and has seen the children grow up and the old people stay young; the smile has not left his face during those nine years. The chief tells him what has been happening to the family. "When you give, you must say 'shakra' (thank you) and 'Ramadan Kareem' (Happy Ramadan)," said Chen. After the distribution, one old man had to walk 15 kilometres to reach home. "God protect you. Take care, take care," said Chen. He strides happily off on his way, as the sun sets over the Dead Sea.



Becoming a vegetarian was no easy decision in a country with a meat-based diet and few vegetables. He has only been able to fulfill his vow thanks to his wife of over 30 years, Gao Yiyi; it is she who ensures that he eats a variety of healthy vegetarian dishes. Since Jordan is 80 per cent desert, the only vegetarian foods available are melons and squashes which prosper in the hot, dry climate. So, when his wife goes abroad, she fills her luggage with food for her husband. "This is a treasure, isn't it?" she said. "I packed it in a beautiful box. It's ... golden mushrooms! This has to last half a year! This is your Taiwanese vegetarian meat sauce. It's all for him, because I don't eat the stuff. It's all vegetarian. I bought these in Taiwan, and carried them back. They were pretty heavy!" Chen said that once he only had peanuts and plain rice to eat. "I sat here and she was crying over there. She asked why I did that to myself, why did I put myself through that? I said that taking the vegetarian path was my own choice. I chose this path myself, so don't be upset." He said that the food tasted even better because his wife had brought it from Hong Kong. "Whatever she makes, it is always the best. All husbands should learn from me."

The precious vegetarian ingredients are used and eaten sparingly. Chen is often away on business trips. Whenever he is at home, Gao will make a meal for a rare family dinner. "These are dried turnips," she said "You take them for granted, but they're precious to us. I fry them everyday, just like this."

It was fate that brought the two people together. A British woman and a Taiwanese man who met in Jordan and decided they wanted to spend the rest of their lives together. Love helped

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them make a happy home in a foreign land.